

The Best Pasta Bakes

THE BEST PASTA BAKES

50 unpublished recipes
for needy, saucy, big-flavour oven comfort



Author: Robin Wickens

Robs Books

The Best Pasta Bakes

50 Recipes For Cosy, Golden, Bubbling Dinners

By Robin Wickens

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Dedication

For everyone who has ever “just popped it in the oven” and somehow produced dinner, comfort, and a tiny miracle.

Notes To The Reader

Pasta bakes are the friend who turns up with a casserole dish and zero judgement. They are forgiving, scalable, fridge-friendly, and deeply satisfying in that particular way only browned cheese can be.

This book is written for UK kitchens: metric measures, British supermarket ingredients, and realistic weeknight rhythms. You’ll find optional swaps for common allergens, notes for dietary preferences, and freezer guidance so you can cook once and feel smug twice.

A quick note on timings: ovens vary. If your bake is bubbling at the edges and the top is properly golden, you’re home and dry. If it still looks pale and shy, give it another 5–10 minutes and let the crust do what it came here to do.

How This Book Is Organised

You'll get 50 pasta bakes, grouped into chapters by vibe (cosy classics, bold and spicy, veggie heroes, lighter-but-still-cheesy, and big weekend showstoppers). Each recipe includes:

Store Cupboard List

If you keep these in, you can turn almost any random Tuesday into a pasta bake:

Pasta and grains

Dried pasta shapes (penne, fusilli, rigatoni, macaroni)

Lasagne sheets (dried is fine)

Rice (for bulking side dishes)

Breadcrumbs or panko (or stale bread to blitz)

Tins and jars

Chopped tomatoes

Passata

Tomato purée

Tuna (spring water or oil)

Sweetcorn

Roasted red peppers (jar)

Capers (optional, but brilliant)

Olives

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Pesto (jarred)

Stock cubes/pots (chicken, veg)

Dairy and dairy-adjacent

Butter

Milk (or long-life)

Double cream (optional luxury)

Cream cheese

Crème fraîche

Cheddar (mature is your friend)

Mozzarella

Parmesan or Grana Padano (or vegetarian hard-cheese alternative)

Herbs, spices, flavour builders

Garlic granules (and/or fresh garlic)

Dried oregano, basil, thyme

Smoked paprika

Chilli flakes

Ground black pepper

Mustard (Dijon or English)

Worcestershire sauce

Soy sauce (for umami, even in non-Asian bakes)

Flour (plain)

Cornflour (helpful for quick thickening)

Oils and extras

Olive oil

Vegetable oil

Vinegar (red wine or cider)

Honey or sugar (for balancing tomato sauces)

Equipment You'll Actually Use

A large baking dish (about 30 x 20 cm is a workhorse)

A deep roasting tin (for bigger batches)

A large saucepan (pasta)

A frying pan (sauce base)

A whisk (for smooth cheese sauce)

A colander

A wooden spoon

A box grater

Measuring jug and spoons

Foil (for covering while it heats through)

Freezer tubs or foil trays (if batch cooking)

Techniques: Pasta Bake Basics

Undercook the pasta

Boil pasta 2 minutes less than the packet says. It finishes cooking in the oven, soaking up sauce rather than turning into soft defeat.

Sauce thickness matters

A pasta bake needs a sauce that clings. If your sauce is thin like soup, it'll separate and puddle. If it's too thick, it can go stodgy. Aim for "coats the back of a spoon".

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Cheese layering is strategy

Mix some cheese through for melt, then top with a second cheese for crust. Cheddar for flavour, mozzarella for stretch, parmesan-style for salty sparkle.

Resting is not optional

Let your bake sit 5–10 minutes after the oven. It firms up, slices better, and stops you burning the roof of your mouth in a heroic but unnecessary way.

Crispy topping without dryness

Breadcrumbs love a little fat. Toss panko with a drizzle of olive oil or a knob of melted butter, then sprinkle. You'll get crunch without turning the bake into the Sahara.

Conversions & Temperatures (Quick Reference)

Oven temperatures in this book are conventional ovens unless stated.

If you use a fan oven, reduce by 20°C.

Typical guide

200°C conventional = 180°C fan

190°C conventional = 170°C fan

180°C conventional = 160°C fan

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Portion scaling

Doubling a recipe usually needs a deeper dish and a bit longer in the oven. Cover with foil for the first half so the top doesn't overbrown before the centre is hot.

Allergens & Swaps

Gluten

Use gluten-free pasta (maize/rice blends work well). Keep sauces slightly looser; GF pasta can absorb more.

Dairy

Use unsweetened oat milk for white sauces, vegan butter/spread, and dairy-free cheese that melts well. Add a pinch more salt and mustard for depth.

Egg

Most pasta bakes are naturally egg-free unless you're using fresh egg pasta, fresh filled pasta, or enriched sauces. Check labels.

Fish

Swap tuna/haddock for cooked chicken, mushrooms, or roasted veg. Use capers/olives to keep the briny punch.

Vegetarian rennet

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Choose vegetarian hard-cheese alternatives instead of parmesan-style if needed.

Food Safety And Reheating

Cool leftovers quickly, refrigerate within 2 hours, and eat within 2 days.

Reheat until piping hot all the way through.

If freezing, cool completely first, wrap well, label with date, and use within 3 months for best quality.

Chapter 1: Classic Comforts

Recipe 1: Proper Macaroni Cheese Bake With Leek, Mustard And A Crunchy Top



Serves: 4–6

Time: 20 minutes prep, 25–30 minutes bake

Ingredients

300 g macaroni

40 g butter

40 g plain flour

700 ml milk

1 tsp Dijon mustard (or ½ tsp English mustard)

½ tsp smoked paprika (optional, but lovely)

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200 g mature Cheddar, grated
50 g mozzarella, grated (optional for stretch)
1 medium leek, finely sliced
Salt and black pepper

For the topping

60 g panko breadcrumbs (or fresh breadcrumbs)
25 g parmesan-style cheese (or vegetarian alternative),
finely grated
1 tbsp olive oil or 20 g melted butter

Method

1. Heat the oven to 200°C (180°C fan). Butter a baking dish.
2. Cook the macaroni in salted boiling water for 2 minutes less than packet instructions. Drain, reserving a mug of the starchy water.
3. In a saucepan, melt the butter and gently soften the leek for 5–6 minutes until sweet and soft, not browned.
4. Stir in the flour and cook for 1 minute, stirring constantly. This cooks off the raw flour taste and sets you up for a smooth sauce.
5. Add the milk gradually, whisking as you go, until you have a thick, glossy sauce. Simmer gently for 2–3 minutes.
6. Stir in mustard, paprika, most of the Cheddar, and the mozzarella (if using). Season well. If it's very thick, add a splash of reserved pasta water.
7. Fold the pasta into the sauce and tip into the dish.

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8. Mix topping ingredients and scatter over. Bake for 25–30 minutes until deeply golden and bubbling at the edges. Rest 5 minutes before serving.

UK Substitutions And Variations

No leek: use 1 small onion, softened gently.

Extra comfort: stir through 150 g cooked ham or leftover roast chicken.

Veg boost: add a handful of spinach at the end of the sauce stage.

Allergens

Gluten, dairy.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian if using vegetarian hard cheese. Not gluten-free unless using GF pasta and flour alternative.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 520; protein 23 g; fat 22 g; carbs 55 g; fibre 3 g; salt 1.3 g.

Pairing

Crisp dry cider, or a lightly oaked Chardonnay.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Cool completely, freeze up to 3 months. Reheat from thawed at 180°C (160°C fan) for 25–30 minutes until piping hot (cover with foil for the first 15 minutes).

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Recipe 2: Chicken And Chorizo Arrabbiata Pasta Bake



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne or rigatoni

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

120 g chorizo, diced

450 g chicken thigh fillets, chopped (or breast if preferred)

2 tbsp tomato purée

1 tsp chilli flakes (adjust to taste)

1 tsp dried oregano

1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes

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300 ml passata

1 tsp sugar or honey (optional, balances acidity)

150 g mozzarella, torn or grated

60 g mature Cheddar, grated

Salt and black pepper

Fresh parsley, to serve (optional)

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. In a pan, heat oil and soften onion for 5 minutes. Add garlic, cook 30 seconds.
4. Add chorizo and let it release its oils for 2 minutes. Add chicken and cook until lightly coloured.
5. Stir in tomato purée, chilli, oregano. Cook 1 minute.
6. Add chopped tomatoes, passata, and sugar (if using). Simmer 8–10 minutes until thick enough to coat pasta. Season well.
7. Combine pasta and sauce, pour into dish. Top with mozzarella and Cheddar.
8. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and bronzed. Rest 5 minutes.

UK Substitutions And Variations

Swap chorizo: use smoked bacon or a pinch more smoked paprika.

Add veg: diced peppers or courgette softened with the onion.

Allergens

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Dairy (if using cheese). Gluten if using standard pasta.

Dietary Notes

Not vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 540; protein 30 g; fat 22 g; carbs 52 g; fibre 4 g; salt 1.6 g.

Pairing

Cold lager or a juicy Spanish Tempranillo.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze in portions. Reheat covered, then uncover for final 5 minutes to re-crisp the top.

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Recipe 3: Spinach And Ricotta Cannelloni With Tomato Basil Sauce



Serves: 4–6

Time: 30 minutes prep, 35–40 minutes bake

Ingredients

12 cannelloni tubes (about 250 g)

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes

500 ml passata

1 tsp dried basil (or a handful of fresh basil at the end)

1 tbsp balsamic vinegar (optional, for richness)

Salt and black pepper

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Filling

300 g spinach (fresh) or 250 g frozen spinach, thawed and squeezed dry

250 g ricotta

60 g grated mozzarella

30 g parmesan-style cheese (or vegetarian alternative)

Pinch nutmeg

Zest of ½ lemon (optional, brightens)

Topping

80 g mozzarella, grated

30 g parmesan-style cheese

Method

1. Heat oven to 190°C (170°C fan).
2. Make the sauce: soften onion in oil 6–7 minutes. Add garlic. Stir in tomatoes, passata, basil, vinegar. Simmer 10 minutes until thickened. Season.
3. Make the filling: if using fresh spinach, wilt in a pan, cool, squeeze dry, chop. Mix with ricotta, cheeses, nutmeg, lemon zest. Season generously.
4. Spoon half the sauce into a baking dish. Fill cannelloni using a teaspoon (or a piping bag if you fancy feeling efficient). Arrange in the dish.
5. Pour remaining sauce over, ensuring tubes are well covered so they soften properly.
6. Top with cheeses. Cover with foil and bake 25 minutes. Uncover and bake 10–15 minutes until golden and bubbling. Rest 10 minutes.

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UK Substitutions And Variations

Add roasted butternut squash cubes to the filling for sweetness.

For extra protein, stir in 1 drained tin of lentils to the filling.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Gluten-free only with GF cannelloni (harder to find, but possible online).

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 410; protein 21 g; fat 18 g; carbs 40 g; fibre 5 g; salt 1.1 g.

Pairing

Sangiovese or a chilled Italian pilsner.

Freezer Suitability

Excellent. Freeze before baking (well wrapped) or after baking in portions. Add 10–15 minutes to oven time if baking from chilled.

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Recipe 4: Old-School Tuna And Sweetcorn Pasta Bake

(The One Everyone Secretly Wants)



Serves: 4–6

Time: 15 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g fusilli

40 g butter

40 g plain flour

650 ml milk

2 x 145 g tins tuna, drained

200 g sweetcorn (tinned, drained, or frozen, defrosted)

1 tsp Dijon mustard

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½ tsp black pepper

180 g mature Cheddar, grated

Optional: 1 tbsp chopped chives or spring onions

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under, drain.
3. Make white sauce: melt butter, stir in flour 1 minute, whisk in milk gradually. Simmer until thick.
4. Stir in mustard, pepper, and most of the cheese until melted.
5. Fold through tuna, sweetcorn, and pasta. Spoon into dish.
6. Top with remaining cheese. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes.

UK Substitutions And Variations

Add peas instead of sweetcorn, or do half-and-half.

For a sharper edge, add 1 tbsp capers or a squeeze of lemon.

Allergens

Fish, dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Pescatarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta and suitable flour swap for sauce.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

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Calories 480; protein 27 g; fat 18 g; carbs 50 g; fibre 3 g; salt 1.2 g.

Pairing

Cold pale ale, or a crisp Sauvignon Blanc.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions. Reheat with a splash of milk stirred in if it seems a little thick after thawing.

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Recipe 5: Sausage, Fennel And Tomato Rigatoni Bake



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g rigatoni

1 tbsp olive oil

6 good-quality pork sausages (about 400–450 g), skins removed

1 onion, chopped

1 fennel bulb, finely sliced

2 garlic cloves, crushed

2 tbsp tomato purée

1 tsp dried oregano

1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes

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300 ml passata
100 ml water or stock
150 g mozzarella, grated
50 g Cheddar, grated
Salt and black pepper

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. In a pan, heat oil. Fry sausage meat in chunks until browned. Remove to a bowl.
4. In the same pan, soften onion and fennel 8–10 minutes until sweet. Add garlic.
5. Stir in purée and oregano. Add tomatoes, passata, water/stock. Return sausage. Simmer 10 minutes until thick. Season.
6. Mix with pasta, tip into dish. Top with cheeses.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and bronzed.

UK Substitutions And Variations

No fennel: use a finely sliced courgette or extra onion.

Make it spicy: add chilli flakes when you add garlic.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Not vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta and check sausages.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 560; protein 26 g; fat 26 g; carbs 54 g; fibre 4 g; salt 1.7 g.

Pairing

Italian red (Barbera) or a malty amber ale.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze cooked portions. Reheat covered, then uncover to re-crisp the top.

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Recipe 6: Creamy Mushroom Stroganoff Pasta Bake



Serves: 4–6

Time: 20 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne

2 tbsp butter

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

400 g chestnut mushrooms, sliced

1 tsp smoked paprika

1 tbsp plain flour

400 ml vegetable stock

200 ml crème fraîche (or sour cream)

1 tsp Dijon mustard

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1 tbsp Worcestershire sauce (optional; check vegetarian version)

120 g Cheddar, grated

Salt and black pepper

Chopped parsley, to serve

Method

1. Heat oven to 190°C (170°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Fry onion in butter and oil 5 minutes. Add mushrooms and cook 8–10 minutes until they've given up their water and started to brown. This is where the flavour lives.
4. Stir in paprika and flour. Cook 1 minute.
5. Add stock gradually, stirring, until thickened. Simmer 2–3 minutes.
6. Stir in crème fraîche, mustard, and Worcestershire (if using). Season well.
7. Mix with pasta, tip into dish, top with Cheddar.
8. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden.

UK Substitutions And Variations

Add spinach for greenery.

Add cooked chicken for a meat version.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten. Worcestershire may contain fish unless using a vegetarian version.

Dietary Notes

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Vegetarian if using vegetarian Worcestershire (or omit).
Gluten-free with GF pasta and cornflour slurry instead of flour.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 470; protein 18 g; fat 20 g; carbs 55 g; fibre 4 g;
salt 1.1 g.

Pairing

Dry Riesling or a crisp pilsner.

Freezer Suitability

Better chilled than frozen (cream sauces can split slightly). If freezing, reheat gently and stir well; add a splash of milk to revive.

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Recipe 7: Roasted Veg, Pesto And Mozzarella Pasta Bake



Serves: 4–6

Time: 20 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g fusilli or penne

2 courgettes, chopped

1 red pepper, chopped

1 yellow pepper, chopped

250 g cherry tomatoes

2 tbsp olive oil

Salt and black pepper

180 g green pesto (jarred)

200 g crème fraîche (or soft cream cheese loosened with a splash of milk)

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150 g mozzarella, torn

40 g parmesan-style cheese (optional)

Method

1. Heat oven to 210°C (190°C fan).
2. Toss courgettes, peppers, tomatoes with olive oil, salt and pepper. Roast 15 minutes until softened and lightly charred at the edges.
3. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
4. Mix pesto with crème fraîche. Toss pasta with roasted veg and pesto mixture.
5. Tip into baking dish, dot with mozzarella, sprinkle parmesan-style if using.
6. Bake 15–20 minutes until bubbling and golden in spots. Rest 5 minutes.

UK Substitutions And Variations

Nut-free pesto: use a nut-free jar, or make a quick basil sauce with basil, garlic, olive oil, lemon, and hard cheese alternative.

Add protein: stir through a drained tin of chickpeas before baking.

Allergens

Dairy. Pesto often contains nuts and sometimes egg; check label. Gluten if using standard pasta.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Can be nut-free with the right pesto. Gluten-free with GF pasta.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 460; protein 15 g; fat 22 g; carbs 52 g; fibre 5 g; salt 1.2 g.

Pairing

Pinot Grigio or a session IPA.

Freezer Suitability

Yes, though basil can dull slightly. Freeze portions and reheat covered.

Recipe 8: Proper Beef Ragu Lasagne

(Weekend Energy, Weeknight Leftovers)



Serves: 6–8

Time: 35 minutes prep, 45 minutes bake (plus resting)

Ingredients

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

1 carrot, finely chopped

1 celery stick, finely chopped (optional but classic)

2 garlic cloves, crushed

500 g beef mince (10–15% fat works well)

2 tbsp tomato purée

150 ml red wine (optional; or use extra stock)

1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes

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500 ml passata

1 tsp dried oregano

1 beef stock cube + 150 ml hot water

Salt and black pepper

Lasagne sheets (about 10–12)

Béchamel

50 g butter

50 g plain flour

800 ml milk

Pinch nutmeg

120 g Cheddar, grated

30 g parmesan-style cheese (optional)

Method

1. Heat oven to 190°C (170°C fan).
2. Make ragu: soften onion, carrot, celery in oil 8–10 minutes. Add garlic.
3. Add mince and cook until browned, breaking up lumps. Stir in purée and cook 1 minute.
4. Add wine (if using) and bubble for 2 minutes. Add tomatoes, passata, oregano, stock. Simmer 15–20 minutes until thick. Season well.
5. Make béchamel: melt butter, stir in flour 1 minute. Gradually whisk in milk. Simmer until thick, season, add nutmeg. Stir in Cheddar.
6. Assemble: a thin layer of ragu, then pasta sheets, then béchamel. Repeat, finishing with béchamel.
7. Bake 40–45 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 15 minutes to slice neatly.

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UK Substitutions And Variations

Swap beef for turkey mince.

Add lentils (1 drained tin) to stretch the ragu.

Alcohol-free: omit wine and add a splash of balsamic for depth.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Not vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF lasagne sheets and GF flour swap.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 8)

Calories 520; protein 30 g; fat 22 g; carbs 45 g; fibre 4 g; salt 1.4 g.

Pairing

Rioja or a robust brown ale.

Freezer Suitability

Brilliant. Freeze unbaked or baked. If baking from frozen, cover with foil and allow extra time until piping hot.

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Recipe 9: Smoked Haddock And Pea Gratin Pasta Bake



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne

300 g smoked haddock (undyed or dyed), skin removed

600 ml milk

1 bay leaf (optional)

30 g butter

30 g plain flour

150 g frozen peas

1 tbsp chopped parsley or dill

Zest of ½ lemon

120 g Cheddar, grated (or a mix with mozzarella)

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Topping

50 g breadcrumbs

1 tbsp melted butter or olive oil

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Poach haddock: place in a pan with milk and bay leaf. Bring to a gentle simmer, cook 4–5 minutes until just done. Lift fish out, flake. Keep the milk.
3. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
4. Make sauce: melt butter, stir in flour 1 minute. Whisk in the reserved milk gradually. Simmer until thick.
5. Stir in peas, herbs, lemon zest, and half the cheese. Fold in flaked haddock gently.
6. Combine with pasta, tip into dish. Top with remaining cheese and buttery breadcrumbs.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until golden and bubbling. Rest 5 minutes.

UK Substitutions And Variations

Swap haddock for smoked mackerel (stir in at the end; it's already bold).

Add sweetcorn instead of peas.

Allergens

Fish, dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

The Best Pasta Bakes

Pescatarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta and GF flour/breadcrumbs.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 460; protein 29 g; fat 16 g; carbs 52 g; fibre 4 g; salt 1.5 g (smoked fish varies).

Pairing

Dry cider, or a crisp Albariño.

Freezer Suitability

Yes, but best eaten within 2 months (fish is happiest not left too long). Reheat gently, covered, until piping hot.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 10: Creamy Tomato Tortellini Bake With Garlic Butter Crumbs



Serves: 4–5

Time: 15 minutes prep, 20–25 minutes bake

Ingredients

700 g fresh chilled tortellini (cheese or spinach)

1 tbsp olive oil

2 garlic cloves, crushed

2 tbsp tomato purée

500 ml passata

200 ml double cream (or crème fraîche for tang)

1 tsp dried basil

Salt and black pepper

120 g mozzarella, grated

40 g Cheddar, grated

The Best Pasta Bakes

Garlic butter crumbs

40 g breadcrumbs or panko

25 g butter, melted

1 small garlic clove, finely grated

Pinch salt

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. In a pan, heat oil and cook garlic 30 seconds. Stir in purée 1 minute.
3. Add passata, basil, simmer 5 minutes. Stir in cream, season.
4. Stir tortellini through the sauce and tip into dish (fresh tortellini cooks fast; it will finish in the oven).
5. Top with cheeses. Mix crumb ingredients and scatter over.
6. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes.

UK Substitutions And Variations

Use ravioli instead of tortellini (treat gently).

Add a handful of spinach stirred into the hot sauce to wilt.

Allergens

Gluten, dairy, possibly egg (fresh pasta often contains egg—check label).

Dietary Notes

The Best Pasta Bakes

Vegetarian depending on tortellini filling and cheese. Not suitable for egg-free if pasta contains egg.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 5)

Calories 610; protein 22 g; fat 30 g; carbs 62 g; fibre 4 g; salt 1.4 g.

Pairing

Light red (Pinot Noir) or a citrusy wheat beer.

Freezer Suitability

Better chilled than frozen (filled fresh pasta can soften).

Refrigerate leftovers up to 2 days; reheat covered until piping hot.

The Golden Top Rule

(And Other Pasta Bake Truths)

A pasta bake is, at heart, an edible agreement between you and your oven: you provide sauce, carbs, and a bit of optimism; the oven provides alchemy.

The top is not decoration. The top is a statement of intent.

If your bake emerges pale and apologetic, you haven't failed—you've simply made "pasta with warm intentions". To turn it into a proper bake, you need three things: heat, fat, and time.

Heat gives you bubbling edges, the deliciously sticky bit where sauce caramelises against the dish. Fat gives your crumbs (or cheese) the confidence to brown. Time gives the whole thing a chance to settle into itself so it slices rather than collapses into a molten heap.

A few practical rules that will save your supper:

First, don't drown it. Sauce should coat pasta, not submerge it. If you can see a lake, it will taste like one.

Second, cover early, uncover late. If you're worried the top will burn before the centre is hot, foil it for the first half of baking, then remove foil and let the crust do its job.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Third, rest it. A pasta bake needs five minutes out of the oven to stop behaving like a lava field. If you serve it instantly, it will run. If you wait, it will hold. The difference is not patience; it's physics.

And finally: if you've made more than you need, congratulations. You've cooked tomorrow's dinner too. That is the sort of competence that deserves a cup of tea and a moment of quiet triumph.

Chapter 2: Bold, Spicy And Big-Flavour Bakes

Recipe 11: Cajun Chicken Pasta Bake With Peppers And Charred Corn



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne or fusilli

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

2 peppers (any colour), sliced

The Best Pasta Bakes

250 g sweetcorn (tinned, drained, or frozen, defrosted)
500 g chicken thighs, chopped
2 tbsp Cajun seasoning (check salt level)
2 tbsp tomato purée
400 ml passata
150 ml chicken stock (from a cube is fine)
150 g cream cheese
120 g Cheddar, grated
80 g mozzarella, grated (optional)
Salt and black pepper
1 lime, cut into wedges (optional, to serve)

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. In a large pan, heat oil and soften onion 5 minutes. Add garlic, cook 30 seconds.
4. Add peppers and cook 4–5 minutes to soften slightly. Stir in chicken and Cajun seasoning. Cook until the chicken is no longer pink on the outside.
5. Stir in tomato purée for 1 minute, then add passata and stock. Simmer 8–10 minutes until thick enough to coat pasta.
6. Stir in cream cheese until smooth. Taste and season carefully (Cajun blends vary).
7. Mix with pasta, spoon into a baking dish, top with Cheddar and mozzarella.
8. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes. Squeeze over lime if you like a fresher finish.

The Best Pasta Bakes

UK Substitutions And Variations

No Cajun seasoning: use 1 tsp smoked paprika, ½ tsp chilli flakes, ½ tsp garlic granules, ½ tsp dried thyme, ½ tsp onion granules, pinch of cayenne.

Vegetarian: swap chicken for 1 drained tin of kidney beans and 1 drained tin of chickpeas.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten (if using standard pasta).

Dietary Notes

Gluten-free with GF pasta. Not vegetarian unless adapted.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 520; protein 30 g; fat 20 g; carbs 55 g; fibre 4 g; salt 1.5 g (depends on seasoning).

Pairing

Cold lager or a citrusy IPA.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered, then uncover to re-crisp the top.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 12: Buffalo Chicken Mac Bake With Blue Cheese Crust

(Or A Cheddar Detour)



Serves: 4–6

Time: 20 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g macaroni

40 g butter

40 g plain flour

650 ml milk

150 g mature Cheddar, grated

80 g blue cheese, crumbled (optional but punchy)

400 g cooked chicken (leftover roast is ideal), shredded

The Best Pasta Bakes

120 ml hot sauce (Buffalo-style)

1 tsp garlic granules

Black pepper

Topping

50 g mozzarella, grated

30 g blue cheese or extra Cheddar

Optional: 2 tbsp breadcrumbs for crunch

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Make cheese sauce: melt butter, stir in flour 1 minute, whisk in milk. Simmer until thick.
4. Stir in Cheddar until melted. Add blue cheese if using, plus garlic granules and pepper. (Go easy on salt; cheese and hot sauce bring plenty.)
5. Stir in hot sauce. Taste: you want “warmth and swagger”, not regret.
6. Fold in chicken and pasta. Tip into dish.
7. Top with mozzarella and extra cheese (and breadcrumbs if using).
8. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes.

UK Substitutions And Variations

No blue cheese: use all Cheddar and add 1 tsp Dijon mustard for bite.

Make it smoky: add ½ tsp smoked paprika.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Gluten-free with GF pasta and suitable flour swap.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 560; protein 33 g; fat 25 g; carbs 48 g; fibre 2 g; salt 1.7 g.

Pairing

Pale ale, or off-dry Riesling (surprisingly good with heat).

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze in portions; reheat until piping hot.

Recipe 13: Harissa Roasted Cauliflower And Chickpea Pasta Bake



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g rigatoni or penne

1 small cauliflower, cut into florets

1 x 400 g tin chickpeas, drained and rinsed

2 tbsp olive oil

2 tbsp harissa paste (adjust to taste)

1 red onion, sliced

2 garlic cloves, crushed

1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes

300 ml passata

1 tsp ground cumin

The Best Pasta Bakes

1 tsp honey or sugar (optional)
150 g crème fraîche (or dairy-free alternative)
120 g mozzarella, grated
Salt and black pepper
Fresh coriander, to serve (optional)

Method

1. Heat oven to 220°C (200°C fan).
2. Toss cauliflower and chickpeas with 1 tbsp oil, 1 tbsp harissa, salt and pepper. Roast 15 minutes until browned at the edges.
3. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
4. In a pan, heat remaining oil and soften onion 5 minutes. Add garlic, cumin and remaining harissa.
5. Add tomatoes and passata. Simmer 8–10 minutes until thickened. Stir in crème fraîche and season.
6. Fold in roasted cauliflower and chickpeas, then pasta. Tip into dish, top with mozzarella.
7. Bake 15–20 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes.

UK Substitutions And Variations

No harissa: use 1 tsp smoked paprika + ½ tsp chilli flakes + ½ tsp ground coriander + 1 tbsp tomato purée.
Add feta-style cubes after baking for salty pops.

Allergens

Dairy (if using). Gluten (if using standard pasta).

Dietary Notes

The Best Pasta Bakes

Vegetarian. Can be dairy-free with swaps. Gluten-free with GF pasta.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 460; protein 18 g; fat 16 g; carbs 60 g; fibre 8 g; salt 1.1 g.

Pairing

Wheat beer or a chilled Grenache rosé.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered then uncover.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 14: Beef Taco Pasta Bake With Salsa, Beans And Cheese Pull



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g fusilli

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

500 g beef mince

2 tbsp taco seasoning

2 tbsp tomato purée

1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes

200 g salsa (jar)

1 x 400 g tin kidney beans, drained and rinsed

The Best Pasta Bakes

200 g sweetcorn, drained/defrosted

150 g Cheddar, grated

100 g mozzarella, grated

Salt and black pepper

To serve (optional): sour cream, coriander, sliced spring onions

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Cook onion in oil 5 minutes. Add garlic.
4. Add mince and brown. Stir in taco seasoning and purée 1 minute.
5. Add tomatoes and salsa; simmer 8–10 minutes until thick. Stir in beans and sweetcorn, warm through. Season.
6. Mix with pasta, tip into dish, top with cheeses.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes.

UK Substitutions And Variations

Swap beef: use turkey mince.

Vegetarian: use plant mince or extra beans (black beans + kidney beans).

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

The Best Pasta Bakes

Gluten-free with GF pasta. Not vegetarian unless adapted.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 570; protein 30 g; fat 22 g; carbs 62 g; fibre 7 g; salt 1.6 g.

Pairing

Mexican-style lager or a fruity Zinfandel.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat until piping hot.

Recipe 15: Thai Red Curry Prawn And Coconut Pasta Bake



Serves: 4–5

Time: 20 minutes prep, 20–25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne

1 tbsp oil

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

1–2 tbsp Thai red curry paste (to taste)

1 tbsp tomato purée (optional, deepens colour)

400 ml coconut milk

150 ml chicken or veg stock

1 tbsp fish sauce (optional; or soy sauce for a different kind of umami)

The Best Pasta Bakes

1 tsp sugar

250 g raw king prawns (defrosted if frozen)

150 g green beans, chopped (or peas)

Zest of 1 lime

80 g mozzarella, grated (optional; sounds odd, works)

Salt (careful), black pepper

To serve: coriander, lime wedges

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under, drain.
3. Soften onion in oil 5 minutes, add garlic 30 seconds. Stir in curry paste (and purée if using) for 1 minute.
4. Add coconut milk, stock, fish sauce, sugar. Simmer 6–8 minutes until slightly reduced and coating-spoon thick.
5. Stir in beans for 2 minutes. Remove from heat, stir in lime zest.
6. Combine with pasta. Fold prawns through (they'll cook in the oven).
7. Tip into dish, top with mozzarella if using.
8. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and prawns are pink and cooked through. Rest 5 minutes. Finish with coriander and lime.

UK Substitutions And Variations

Prawns swapped for cooked chicken or tofu cubes.

If avoiding fish sauce, use soy sauce plus a squeeze of lime.

Allergens

The Best Pasta Bakes

Shellfish, gluten (pasta), possibly fish (fish sauce), dairy if using cheese.

Dietary Notes

Pescatarian. Dairy-free if no cheese. Gluten-free with GF pasta.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 5)

Calories 540; protein 24 g; fat 24 g; carbs 58 g; fibre 4 g; salt 1.5 g.

Pairing

Cold lager or a zesty New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc.

Freezer Suitability

Not ideal (prawns can go rubbery). Best refrigerated and eaten within 2 days.

**Recipe 16: Nduja And Roasted Pepper Cream
Pasta Bake**



Serves: 4–6

Time: 20 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g rigatoni

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

80–100 g nduja

1 jar roasted red peppers (about 300 g drained), chopped

2 tbsp tomato purée

400 ml passata

150 ml double cream (or crème fraîche)

120 g mozzarella, grated

The Best Pasta Bakes

50 g parmesan-style cheese

Salt and black pepper

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under, drain.
3. Soften onion in oil 5 minutes. Add garlic.
4. Add nduja and let it melt into the pan, then stir in purée for 1 minute.
5. Add peppers and passata. Simmer 8–10 minutes until thick.
6. Stir in cream, season carefully (nduja is salty).
7. Mix with pasta, tip into dish. Top with mozzarella and parmesan-style.
8. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and bronzed. Rest 5 minutes.

UK Substitutions And Variations

No nduja: use chorizo plus chilli flakes.

Vegetarian heat: use Calabrian chilli paste (or chilli pesto) and add mushrooms.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Not vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

The Best Pasta Bakes

Calories 560; protein 18 g; fat 28 g; carbs 58 g; fibre 4 g; salt 1.6 g.

Pairing

Italian red (Primitivo) or a hoppy pale ale.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 17: Katsu-Style Chicken Pasta Bake With Curry Sauce And Crunchy Crumb Top



Serves: 4–6

Time: 30 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne

2 tbsp oil

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

1 tbsp mild curry powder

1 tbsp plain flour

500 ml chicken stock

2 tbsp soy sauce

1 tbsp honey

200 ml coconut milk or single cream

The Best Pasta Bakes

400 g cooked chicken, sliced or shredded

100 g frozen peas (optional)

Topping

70 g panko breadcrumbs

20 g butter, melted

1 tsp curry powder (optional)

80 g mozzarella or Cheddar, grated (optional, but it helps bind the crust)

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Make curry sauce: soften onion 5 minutes, add garlic. Stir in curry powder 30 seconds.
4. Stir in flour, cook 1 minute. Gradually whisk in stock. Simmer until thick.
5. Stir in soy, honey, coconut milk/cream. Taste and adjust (more soy for salt, more honey for sweetness).
6. Mix pasta with chicken (and peas), pour sauce over, combine and tip into dish.
7. Mix panko with melted butter and curry powder; scatter over (add a little cheese underneath or mixed in if you want extra hold).
8. Bake 20–25 minutes until golden and bubbling. Rest 5 minutes.

UK Substitutions And Variations

No panko: use crushed cornflakes or fresh breadcrumbs.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Vegetarian: use roasted cauliflower or breaded aubergine slices instead of chicken.

Allergens

Gluten, dairy if using cheese, soy.

Dietary Notes

Can be dairy-free if using coconut milk and no cheese.
Gluten-free with GF pasta, tamari, and GF crumbs.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 520; protein 26 g; fat 18 g; carbs 60 g; fibre 3 g; salt 1.4 g.

Pairing

Cold lager, or a citrusy wheat beer.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered then uncover.

Recipe 18: Chipotle Beef And Black Bean Pasta Bake



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g fusilli

1 tbsp oil

1 onion, chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

500 g beef mince

2 tbsp chipotle paste (or smoked chilli paste)

2 tbsp tomato purée

1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes

250 ml passata

1 x 400 g tin black beans, drained and rinsed

The Best Pasta Bakes

120 g Cheddar, grated

80 g mozzarella, grated

Salt and black pepper

Optional: squeeze of lime, coriander

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under, drain.
3. Cook onion 5 minutes, add garlic. Add mince and brown.
4. Stir in chipotle paste and purée 1 minute. Add tomatoes and passata; simmer 8–10 minutes until thick.
5. Stir in black beans, season.
6. Mix with pasta, tip into dish, top with cheeses.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes. Finish with lime if you like.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Gluten-free with GF pasta. Not vegetarian.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 590; protein 31 g; fat 24 g; carbs 62 g; fibre 8 g; salt 1.6 g.

Pairing

Amber ale or a bold Malbec.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat until piping hot.

**Recipe 19: Spicy ‘N’ Sticky Korean-Style
Gochujang Chicken Pasta Bake**



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g rigatoni

1 tbsp oil

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

1 tbsp grated fresh ginger (or 1 tsp ground ginger)

2 tbsp gochujang

2 tbsp soy sauce

1 tbsp honey or brown sugar

1 tbsp rice vinegar (or cider vinegar)

1 tbsp tomato purée

The Best Pasta Bakes

400 ml passata

500 g chicken thighs, chopped

120 g mozzarella, grated (optional)

Spring onions, sliced, to serve

Sesame seeds (optional)

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Soften onion in oil 5 minutes. Add garlic and ginger.
4. Stir in gochujang, soy, honey, vinegar, purée for 1 minute.
5. Add passata and chicken. Simmer 8–10 minutes until thick and chicken is mostly cooked through.
6. Mix with pasta, tip into dish, top with mozzarella if using.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and slightly caramelised on top. Rest 5 minutes. Finish with spring onions and sesame.

UK Substitutions And Variations

No gochujang: use sriracha plus a little miso (or a pinch of sugar and soy), though gochujang is worth seeking out.

Veg version: use mushrooms and tofu cubes.

Allergens

Gluten (soy), dairy if using cheese.

Dietary Notes

The Best Pasta Bakes

Gluten-free with GF pasta and tamari. Dairy-free if no cheese.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 520; protein 28 g; fat 16 g; carbs 62 g; fibre 4 g; salt 1.7 g.

Pairing

Cold lager or a fruity Pinot Noir.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered then uncover.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 20: Spiced Lamb Kofta Pasta Bake With Minty Yoghurt Swirl



Serves: 4–6

Time: 30 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

500 g lamb mince

1½ tsp ground cumin

1 tsp ground coriander

½ tsp cinnamon

1 tsp smoked paprika

2 tbsp tomato purée

The Best Pasta Bakes

1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes

300 ml passata

150 ml stock

Salt and black pepper

120 g mozzarella, grated

50 g Cheddar, grated

Minty yoghurt swirl

200 g thick Greek yoghurt

Handful fresh mint, finely chopped (or 1 tsp dried mint)

½ cucumber, grated and squeezed (optional, for a tzatziki vibe)

Pinch salt, squeeze of lemon

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under, drain.
3. Make sauce: soften onion 5 minutes, add garlic. Add lamb mince and brown.
4. Add spices, stir 30 seconds, then purée for 1 minute.
5. Add tomatoes, passata, stock. Simmer 10–12 minutes until thick. Season.
6. Mix pasta and sauce. Tip into dish, top with cheeses.
7. Bake 20 minutes until bubbling and golden.
8. Mix yoghurt swirl ingredients. Once the bake is out, dollop and swirl over the top (or serve on the side if you prefer a crispier top). Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Dietary Notes

Not vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta. Yoghurt swirl can be dairy-free using a thick plant yoghurt.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 610; protein 28 g; fat 30 g; carbs 58 g; fibre 4 g; salt 1.6 g.

Pairing

Syrah/Shiraz or a peppery bitter.

Freezer Suitability

Freeze the bake without yoghurt swirl (add fresh after reheating). Reheat covered, then uncover to crisp.

Heat Without Heartburn

(A Practical Guide To Spicy Comfort)

Spice in a pasta bake should feel like a warm jumper, not a dare. The point is glow, not bravado. The trick is layering flavour so heat is supported by sweetness, acid, and richness—rather than blasting your mouth and calling it “bold”.

Start with a base note: smoked paprika, cumin, or curry powder gives you warmth even before chilli turns up. Then add chilli in a controllable form: paste (harissa, chipotle, gochujang) is easier than raw chilli because it spreads through sauce evenly.

Next, add a balancing note:

Sweetness (a teaspoon of honey or sugar) rounds tomato acidity and keeps chilli from tasting sharp.

Acid (lime, lemon, vinegar) makes spicy bakes feel fresher and less heavy.

Richness (cream cheese, yoghurt, coconut milk) cushions heat and makes the whole thing taste intentionally luxurious.

And remember the oven changes everything. Heat mellows as it bakes, and flavours marry. If you taste the sauce before baking and it seems just a touch too spicy, it may be perfect after 25 minutes. If it tastes like a fire alarm, it will still taste like a fire alarm.

The Best Pasta Bakes

A final weeknight truth: you can always add more heat at the table (chilli flakes, hot sauce, pickled jalapeños). You cannot remove it once it's in there. Be strategic. Be kind to your future self.

Chapter 3: Veggie Heroes And Comforting Meat-Free Bakes

Recipe 21: Creamy Broccoli, Cheddar And Walnut Pasta Bake

(With A Nut-Free Option)



Serves: 4–6

Time: 20 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g fusilli or penne

The Best Pasta Bakes

1 large broccoli, cut into small florets (about 350–400 g)
40 g butter
40 g plain flour
700 ml milk
1 tsp Dijon mustard
200 g mature Cheddar, grated
60 g cream cheese (optional, for extra silkiness)
Salt and black pepper

Topping

50 g walnuts, roughly chopped (optional)
50 g breadcrumbs or panko
20 g butter, melted (or 1 tbsp olive oil)

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Add broccoli florets for the final 2 minutes of boiling (they'll finish in the oven). Drain well.
3. Make sauce: melt butter, stir in flour 1 minute, whisk in milk gradually. Simmer until thick.
4. Stir in mustard, Cheddar, and cream cheese if using. Season well.
5. Mix pasta and broccoli into the sauce, tip into a baking dish.
6. Mix topping ingredients and scatter over.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes.

UK Substitutions And Variations

The Best Pasta Bakes

Nut-free: skip walnuts and increase breadcrumbs.
Add a handful of frozen peas for sweetness.

Allergens

Gluten, dairy, nuts if using walnuts.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta and a GF thickener (cornflour slurry).

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 480; protein 20 g; fat 22 g; carbs 52 g; fibre 5 g; salt 1.3 g.

Pairing

Crisp cider or a Sauvignon Blanc.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered, then uncover to crisp the top.

Recipe 22: Aubergine Parmigiana Pasta Bake

(Cheesy, Saucy, Properly Dramatic)



Serves: 4–6

Time: 30 minutes prep, 30 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g rigatoni

2 aubergines, sliced into 1 cm rounds

3 tbsp olive oil

Salt and black pepper

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

2 tbsp tomato purée

1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes

500 ml passata

The Best Pasta Bakes

1 tsp dried oregano
1 tsp sugar (optional)
200 g mozzarella, torn
60 g parmesan-style cheese (vegetarian alternative if needed)
Handful fresh basil (optional)

Method

1. Heat oven to 220°C (200°C fan).
2. Roast aubergines: toss slices with olive oil, salt and pepper. Roast on trays 18–22 minutes, turning once, until browned and soft.
3. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
4. Make sauce: soften onion 5 minutes, add garlic, purée 1 minute. Add tomatoes, passata, oregano, sugar. Simmer 10 minutes until thick. Season.
5. In a baking dish, mix pasta with half the sauce. Layer in roasted aubergine slices and remaining sauce.
6. Top with mozzarella and parmesan-style cheese.
7. Bake 25–30 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 10 minutes. Finish with basil.

Allergens

Gluten, dairy.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

The Best Pasta Bakes

Calories 470; protein 17 g; fat 18 g; carbs 60 g; fibre 7 g; salt 1.1 g.

Pairing

Montepulciano d'Abruzzo or a pale ale.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions. Reheat gently to keep aubergine tender.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 23: Butternut Squash, Sage And Blue Cheese Pasta Bake

(Or Goats' Cheese)



Serves: 4–6

Time: 30 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne

1 small butternut squash, peeled and cubed (about 700 g prepared)

2 tbsp olive oil

Salt and black pepper

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

The Best Pasta Bakes

250 ml vegetable stock

200 ml single cream (or crème fraîche)

½ tsp nutmeg

1 tbsp chopped fresh sage (or 1 tsp dried)

120 g blue cheese (or soft goats' cheese), crumbled

80 g mozzarella, grated (optional)

Method

1. Heat oven to 220°C (200°C fan).
2. Roast squash: toss with oil, salt and pepper, roast 20–25 minutes until tender and caramelised.
3. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
4. In a pan, soften onion 5 minutes. Add garlic.
5. Add stock and cream, nutmeg and sage. Simmer 5–6 minutes until slightly reduced and coating-spoon thick.
6. Stir in half the blue cheese to melt. Fold in roasted squash and pasta.
7. Tip into dish, top with remaining blue cheese and mozzarella if using.
8. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5–10 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

The Best Pasta Bakes

Calories 520; protein 16 g; fat 24 g; carbs 62 g; fibre 6 g; salt 1.3 g.

Pairing

Off-dry white (Gewürztraminer) or a fruity cider.

Freezer Suitability

Yes, though blue cheese flavours intensify. Freeze portions; reheat covered then uncover.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 24: Creamy Tomato And Lentil “Bolognese” Pasta Bake



Serves: 4–6

Time: 20 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g rigatoni

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

1 carrot, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

2 tbsp tomato purée

1 tsp dried oregano

1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes

400 ml passata

1 vegetable stock cube + 150 ml hot water

The Best Pasta Bakes

1 x 400 g tin green or brown lentils, drained and rinsed
100 ml milk (or oat milk)
120 g Cheddar (or dairy-free alternative), grated
Salt and black pepper

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Cook onion and carrot in oil 8–10 minutes until softened. Add garlic.
4. Stir in purée and oregano 1 minute. Add tomatoes, passata, stock. Simmer 10 minutes until thick.
5. Stir in lentils and milk to give a softer, creamy finish (surprisingly comforting). Season well.
6. Combine with pasta, tip into dish, top with cheese.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Gluten, dairy unless swapped.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Can be vegan with oat milk and vegan cheese.
Gluten-free with GF pasta.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 460; protein 21 g; fat 12 g; carbs 66 g; fibre 10 g;
salt 1.2 g.

Pairing

The Best Pasta Bakes

Medium-bodied red (Merlot) or a nutty brown ale.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Lentil bakes freeze beautifully.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 25: Halloumi, Roasted Pepper And Olive Pasta Bake



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 20–25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne

250 g halloumi, cubed

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, sliced

1 jar roasted red peppers (about 300 g drained), chopped

120 g black olives, halved

1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes

350 ml passata

1 tsp dried oregano

Pinch chilli flakes (optional)

The Best Pasta Bakes

80 g mozzarella, grated (optional)

Black pepper (halloumi is salty)

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Fry halloumi in a dry pan until golden on all sides. Set aside.
4. Soften onion in olive oil 5 minutes. Add tomatoes, passata, oregano, chilli flakes. Simmer 8–10 minutes until thick.
5. Stir peppers and olives through. Season with pepper.
6. Mix sauce with pasta, fold through halloumi, tip into dish. Top with mozzarella if using.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 520; protein 20 g; fat 22 g; carbs 60 g; fibre 5 g; salt 1.8 g (halloumi varies).

Pairing

Greek white (Assyrtiko) or a crisp lager.

Freezer Suitability

The Best Pasta Bakes

Not ideal: halloumi can toughen. Better chilled and reheated within 2 days.

Recipe 26: Creamy Leek, Mushroom And Gruyère-Style Pasta Bake

(Shop-Friendly Version)



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g fusilli

2 leeks, finely sliced

300 g chestnut mushrooms, sliced

40 g butter

1 tbsp olive oil

2 tbsp plain flour

650 ml milk

The Best Pasta Bakes

1 tsp Dijon mustard
150 g Gruyère (or Emmental), grated
60 g Cheddar, grated
Salt and black pepper
Pinch nutmeg (optional)

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. In a pan, heat butter and oil. Soften leeks 8 minutes until sweet and silky. Add mushrooms and cook 8 minutes until browned.
4. Stir in flour for 1 minute. Gradually whisk in milk. Simmer until thick.
5. Stir in mustard, nutmeg, most of the cheeses. Season.
6. Combine with pasta, tip into dish, top with remaining cheese.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta and cornflour thickener.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 520; protein 21 g; fat 24 g; carbs 55 g; fibre 4 g; salt 1.3 g.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Pairing

Chenin Blanc or a crisp pilsner.

Freezer Suitability

Yes, though cream sauces can slightly soften on thawing; reheat gently and stir well if needed.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 27: Three-Cheese And Tomato Pasta Bake With Garlic Crumb



Serves: 4–6

Time: 15 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne

1 tbsp olive oil

2 garlic cloves, crushed

2 tbsp tomato purée

600 ml passata

1 tsp dried basil

150 g ricotta (or soft cheese)

120 g mozzarella, grated

120 g Cheddar, grated

Salt and black pepper

The Best Pasta Bakes

Garlic crumb

60 g breadcrumbs or panko

20 g butter, melted

1 garlic clove, finely grated

Pinch salt

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Make sauce: cook garlic in oil 30 seconds. Stir in purée 1 minute. Add passata and basil, simmer 6–8 minutes until slightly thick. Season.
4. Stir ricotta through the warm sauce to make it creamy without fuss.
5. Combine pasta and sauce, tip into dish. Top with mozzarella and Cheddar.
6. Mix garlic crumb and sprinkle over.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and deeply golden. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta and GF breadcrumbs.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

The Best Pasta Bakes

Calories 520; protein 22 g; fat 22 g; carbs 58 g; fibre 4 g; salt 1.3 g.

Pairing

Italian red or a crisp cider.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered then uncover.

**Recipe 28: Creamy Sweet Potato, Black Bean And
Lime Pasta Bake**



Serves: 4–6

Time: 30 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g fusilli

1 large sweet potato, peeled and cubed (about 500 g)

1 tbsp olive oil

Salt and black pepper

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

1 tsp smoked paprika

½ tsp chilli flakes (optional)

250 ml veg stock

200 ml crème fraîche (or thick plant alternative)

The Best Pasta Bakes

1 x 400 g tin black beans, drained and rinsed

Zest and juice of 1 lime

120 g Cheddar (or vegan alternative), grated

Method

1. Heat oven to 220°C (200°C fan).
2. Toss sweet potato cubes with oil, salt and pepper. Roast 20 minutes until tender.
3. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
4. Soften onion 5 minutes. Add garlic, paprika, chilli.
5. Add stock and crème fraîche; simmer 5 minutes to thicken slightly.
6. Stir in roasted sweet potato and black beans. Add lime zest and juice. Season.
7. Mix with pasta, tip into dish, top with cheese.
8. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy unless swapped. Gluten if standard pasta.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Can be vegan with plant crème fraîche and vegan cheese. Gluten-free with GF pasta.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 490; protein 18 g; fat 16 g; carbs 68 g; fibre 10 g; salt 1.1 g.

Pairing

The Best Pasta Bakes

Pale ale or a citrusy Sauvignon Blanc.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered.

Recipe 29: Creamy Courgette, Lemon And Pea Pasta Bake With Herb Crust



Serves: 4–6

Time: 20 minutes prep, 20–25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne

2 courgettes, grated

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

200 ml crème fraîche

250 ml vegetable stock

150 g frozen peas

Zest of 1 lemon, plus a squeeze of juice

The Best Pasta Bakes

80 g parmesan-style cheese (vegetarian alternative if needed)

Black pepper

Herb crust

60 g breadcrumbs or panko

1 tbsp olive oil

2 tbsp chopped parsley (or mixed herbs)

Pinch salt

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. In a pan, soften onion 5 minutes. Add garlic. Add grated courgette and cook 4–5 minutes to drive off water.
4. Stir in crème fraîche and stock; simmer 5 minutes until thickened.
5. Stir in peas, lemon zest, and parmesan-style cheese. Season with pepper and a little lemon juice.
6. Combine with pasta, tip into dish.
7. Mix crust ingredients and sprinkle over.
8. Bake 20–25 minutes until golden and bubbling. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta and GF breadcrumbs.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 450; protein 16 g; fat 14 g; carbs 62 g; fibre 6 g; salt 1.0 g.

Pairing

Pinot Grigio or a crisp pilsner.

Freezer Suitability

Better chilled than frozen (courgette can soften).

Refrigerate up to 2 days; reheat covered.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 30: Caramelised Onion, Goat's Cheese And Spinach Pasta Bake



Serves: 4–6

Time: 35 minutes prep, 20–25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g rigatoni

2 tbsp olive oil

2 large onions, thinly sliced

1 tsp sugar (helps caramelize)

2 garlic cloves, crushed

200 ml crème fraîche

200 ml milk

200 g spinach (fresh)

150 g soft goat's cheese

80 g Cheddar, grated (optional, for extra melt)

The Best Pasta Bakes

Salt and black pepper

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Caramelize onions: cook onions in olive oil with sugar and a pinch of salt over low-medium heat for 18–22 minutes, stirring often, until soft and golden-brown. This is the slow bit, but it makes the bake taste like you tried very hard.
3. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
4. Add garlic to onions for 30 seconds. Stir in crème fraîche and milk. Simmer 2–3 minutes.
5. Add spinach and let it wilt. Season well with pepper.
6. Combine sauce with pasta. Tip into dish. Dot goat's cheese over the top and sprinkle Cheddar if using.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and lightly golden. Rest 5–10 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 520; protein 18 g; fat 22 g; carbs 62 g; fibre 4 g; salt 1.2 g.

Pairing

Dry rosé or a Belgian-style wheat beer.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Freezer Suitability

Better chilled than frozen (goat's cheese can change texture). Refrigerate up to 2 days; reheat covered.

The Veggie Bake That Doesn't Apologise

Vegetarian pasta bakes sometimes get stuck trying to imitate meat, as if vegetables are only allowed in the room if they're wearing a disguise. Not here.

The trick to a meat-free bake that feels properly satisfying is to build the three pillars of comfort:

Texture

Roast something. Always. Roasted cauliflower, aubergine, squash—anything that gets browned edges and a little chew. Browning equals depth. Depth equals “nobody asks where the meat is”.

Umami

Tomato purée fried for a minute. Parmesan-style cheese (or a vegetarian alternative). Soy sauce in small, sensible quantities. Mushrooms cooked until they stop steaming and start browning. These are the flavours that make a bake feel rich rather than merely “healthy”.

Creaminess

A splash of milk in lentil sauce. Crème fraîche stirred into tomato. Ricotta melted through. Even a spoonful of cream cheese. You're not making a salad. You're making an oven-baked hug.

The Best Pasta Bakes

And if you need a weeknight win: roast veg while pasta boils, sauce simmers while veg roasts, cheese goes on top, oven does the rest. That's not laziness. That's competent sequencing.

Chapter 4: Lighter Comforts And “Not Too Heavy” Bakes

Recipe 31: Lemon Herb Chicken And Pea Pasta Bake

(Creamy, But Bright)



Serves: 4–6

Time: 20 minutes prep, 20–25 minutes bake

Ingredients

The Best Pasta Bakes

350 g penne
1 tbsp olive oil
1 onion, finely chopped
2 garlic cloves, crushed
400 g cooked chicken, shredded or diced
200 g frozen peas
250 ml chicken stock
200 ml crème fraîche (or light cream cheese loosened with milk)
Zest of 1 lemon + 1 tbsp juice
2 tbsp chopped parsley (or mixed herbs)
80 g parmesan-style cheese (vegetarian alternative if needed)
80 g mozzarella, grated (optional)
Salt and black pepper

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. In a pan, soften onion 5 minutes. Add garlic 30 seconds.
4. Add stock and crème fraîche; simmer 4–5 minutes until lightly thickened.
5. Stir in chicken, peas, lemon zest and juice, herbs, and parmesan-style cheese. Season with pepper and a little salt.
6. Mix with pasta, tip into dish. Top with mozzarella if using.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and lightly golden. Rest 5 minutes.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Gluten-free with GF pasta. Not vegetarian.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 470; protein 28 g; fat 14 g; carbs 55 g; fibre 4 g; salt 1.2 g.

Pairing

Pinot Grigio or a crisp lager.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered with a splash of water or milk to loosen.

**Recipe 32: Salmon, Dill And Spinach Pasta Bake
With Crème Fraîche**



Serves: 4–6

Time: 20 minutes prep, 20–25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g fusilli

350 g salmon fillets (fresh) or 300 g cooked salmon flakes

200 g spinach

250 ml milk

200 g crème fraîche

1 tbsp Dijon mustard

Zest of ½ lemon

2 tbsp chopped dill (or 1 tsp dried)

80 g mozzarella, grated (optional)

60 g parmesan-style cheese

The Best Pasta Bakes

Salt and black pepper

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. If using raw salmon, bake it on a tray for 10–12 minutes until just cooked, then flake. (Or use leftover cooked salmon.)
3. Cook pasta 2 minutes under, drain.
4. Wilt spinach in a pan, squeeze out excess water, chop.
5. In a pan, warm milk and crème fraîche together, whisk in mustard, lemon zest, dill. Season.
6. Stir in salmon and spinach, then pasta. Tip into dish.
7. Top with cheeses if using.
8. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and lightly golden. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Fish, dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Pescatarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 520; protein 30 g; fat 22 g; carbs 48 g; fibre 3 g; salt 1.2 g.

Pairing

Dry white (Picpoul or Sauvignon Blanc) or a crisp pilsner.

Freezer Suitability

The Best Pasta Bakes

Better chilled than frozen (salmon can dry). Refrigerate up to 2 days; reheat covered.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 33: Turkey, Courgette And Tomato Pasta Bake

(Weeknight Workhorse)



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

500 g turkey mince

2 tbsp tomato purée

1 tsp dried oregano

The Best Pasta Bakes

1 courgette, diced
1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes
400 ml passata
150 ml stock
120 g Cheddar, grated
Black pepper, salt to taste

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under, drain.
3. Soften onion 5 minutes, add garlic. Add turkey mince and brown.
4. Stir in purée 1 minute, then oregano and courgette.
5. Add tomatoes, passata, stock. Simmer 10–12 minutes until thick. Season.
6. Mix with pasta, tip into dish, top with Cheddar.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Gluten-free with GF pasta. Not vegetarian.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 480; protein 30 g; fat 14 g; carbs 58 g; fibre 5 g; salt 1.3 g.

Pairing

The Best Pasta Bakes

Merlot or a malty amber ale.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered then uncover.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 34: “Green Goddess” Pasta Bake With Broccoli, Peas And Soft Cheese



Serves: 4–6

Time: 20 minutes prep, 20–25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g fusilli

1 broccoli, small florets

200 g frozen peas

1 tbsp olive oil

2 garlic cloves, crushed

200 g soft cheese (cream cheese or herb soft cheese)

250 ml milk

2 tbsp pesto (optional, boosts flavour)

Zest of ½ lemon

60 g parmesan-style cheese

The Best Pasta Bakes

Black pepper, salt to taste

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Add broccoli for last 2 minutes. Drain.
3. In a pan, warm soft cheese with milk until smooth. Add garlic, pesto (if using), lemon zest, parmesan-style. Season well with pepper.
4. Stir peas through (they'll heat quickly), then pasta and broccoli.
5. Tip into dish. If you want a little top colour, add a small handful of grated cheese.
6. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling with light golden patches. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten. Pesto may contain nuts.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta. Nut-free with nut-free pesto or omit.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 460; protein 18 g; fat 16 g; carbs 62 g; fibre 6 g; salt 1.2 g.

Pairing

Dry white or a crisp lager.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered with a splash of milk.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 35: Mediterranean Tuna, Tomato And Olive Pasta Bake

(Light But Punchy)



Serves: 4–6

Time: 20 minutes prep, 20–25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

2 tbsp tomato purée

1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes

450 ml passata

The Best Pasta Bakes

1 tsp dried oregano
2 x 145 g tins tuna, drained
120 g black olives, halved
1 tbsp capers (optional)
80 g mozzarella, grated (optional)
40 g parmesan-style cheese
Black pepper, salt to taste

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Make sauce: soften onion 5 minutes, add garlic, then purée 1 minute. Add tomatoes, passata, oregano. Simmer 10 minutes until thick.
4. Stir in tuna, olives, capers (if using). Season with pepper; go easy on salt.
5. Mix with pasta, tip into dish. Top with cheeses if using.
6. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Fish, gluten, dairy if using cheese.

Dietary Notes

Pescatarian. Dairy-free if no cheese. Gluten-free with GF pasta.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 420; protein 26 g; fat 10 g; carbs 58 g; fibre 5 g; salt 1.4 g.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Pairing

Dry white (Vermentino) or a crisp lager.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered.

**Recipe 36: Creamy Chicken, Mushroom And
Tarragon Pasta Bake**

(The “Grown-Up” One)



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 20–25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g fusilli

1 tbsp butter + 1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

300 g chestnut mushrooms, sliced

400 g cooked chicken, shredded

250 ml chicken stock

200 ml crème fraîche

The Best Pasta Bakes

1 tsp Dijon mustard
1–2 tsp dried tarragon (or 1 tbsp fresh, chopped)
80 g parmesan-style cheese
Black pepper, salt to taste
Optional: 80 g mozzarella for the top

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Fry onion in butter and oil 5 minutes. Add mushrooms and cook 8–10 minutes until browned.
4. Add stock and simmer 3–4 minutes. Stir in crème fraîche, mustard, tarragon, parmesan-style. Season.
5. Stir in chicken and pasta. Tip into dish. Top with mozzarella if using.
6. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling with light golden patches. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Gluten-free with GF pasta.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 490; protein 30 g; fat 18 g; carbs 52 g; fibre 3 g; salt 1.2 g.

Pairing

Chardonnay or a Belgian-style blonde ale.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 37: Tomato, Basil And Ricotta Pasta Bake With Hidden Veg Sauce



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, chopped

1 carrot, chopped

1 red pepper, chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

2 tbsp tomato purée

1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes

500 ml passata

1 tsp dried basil

The Best Pasta Bakes

150 g ricotta

120 g mozzarella, grated

Salt and black pepper

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Make hidden veg sauce: soften onion, carrot, pepper 10 minutes. Add garlic and purée.
4. Add tomatoes, passata, basil. Simmer 10 minutes. Blend until smooth (optional but great for picky eaters). Season.
5. Stir pasta into sauce, tip into dish. Dollop ricotta over and swirl lightly. Top with mozzarella.
6. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 460; protein 18 g; fat 14 g; carbs 62 g; fibre 6 g; salt 1.1 g.

Pairing

Sangiovese or a crisp pilsner.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 38: Courgette, Tuna And Lemon Pasta Bake

(Light, Fast, Properly Useful)



Serves: 4–6

Time: 20 minutes prep, 20–25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g fusilli

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

1 courgette, grated

250 ml milk

200 g crème fraîche

The Best Pasta Bakes

Zest of 1 lemon + 1 tbsp juice

2 x 145 g tins tuna, drained

80 g parmesan-style cheese

Black pepper, salt to taste

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Soften onion 5 minutes. Add garlic and grated courgette; cook 5 minutes to drive off water.
4. Stir in milk and crème fraîche; simmer 4–5 minutes until thickened.
5. Add lemon zest and juice, tuna, parmesan-style. Season with pepper.
6. Mix with pasta, tip into dish. If you want more top colour, add a small handful of grated cheese.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Fish, dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Pescatarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 430; protein 26 g; fat 14 g; carbs 52 g; fibre 3 g; salt 1.2 g.

Pairing

Crisp white or a light lager.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered and gently so tuna stays tender.

Recipe 39: Tomato And Mozzarella Orzo Bake

(Pasta Bake Meets Risotto Mood)



Serves: 4–6

Time: 15 minutes prep, 30 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g orzo

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

2 tbsp tomato purée

700 ml passata

400 ml vegetable stock

1 tsp dried oregano

200 g mozzarella, torn

The Best Pasta Bakes

40 g parmesan-style cheese

Salt and black pepper

Basil, to serve (optional)

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. In a pan, soften onion 5 minutes. Add garlic, then purée 1 minute.
3. Add passata, stock, oregano. Bring to a simmer and season.
4. Stir in orzo and pour into a deep baking dish. Dot mozzarella over the top and sprinkle parmesan-style.
5. Bake 25–30 minutes, stirring once halfway, until orzo is tender and the top is golden in places. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Gluten-free only with GF orzo (less common; may need online).

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 450; protein 16 g; fat 12 g; carbs 66 g; fibre 4 g; salt 1.2 g.

Pairing

Pinot Grigio or a crisp lager.

Freezer Suitability

The Best Pasta Bakes

Yes. Orzo can soften a bit; reheat covered with a splash of water.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 40: Lightened-Up Caesar Chicken Pasta Bake

(Yes, It Works)



Serves: 4–6

Time: 20 minutes prep, 20–25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne

400 g cooked chicken, shredded

250 ml milk

200 g Greek yoghurt

1 tbsp Dijon mustard

1 tsp garlic granules

1 tbsp lemon juice

The Best Pasta Bakes

2 tbsp grated parmesan-style cheese (plus 40 g extra for top)

Black pepper

Optional: 1 tbsp Worcestershire sauce (or vegetarian version)

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. In a bowl, whisk milk, yoghurt, mustard, garlic granules, lemon juice, parmesan-style, plenty of black pepper, and Worcestershire (if using). This is a no-cook sauce that thickens beautifully in the oven.
4. Stir in chicken and pasta. Tip into dish.
5. Sprinkle extra parmesan-style over the top (add a small handful of mozzarella if you want more browning).
6. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and lightly golden. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten. Worcestershire may contain fish unless using a vegetarian version.

Dietary Notes

Gluten-free with GF pasta. Lower-fat option compared with heavy cream sauces.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 430; protein 30 g; fat 10 g; carbs 55 g; fibre 3 g; salt 1.2 g.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Pairing

Dry white or a crisp lager.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered with a splash of milk.

The “Light” Bake That Still Feels Like Dinner

There are two kinds of “light” meals: the ones that make you feel virtuous, and the ones that make you raid the biscuit tin at 9 pm because your dinner was basically a suggestion.

A lighter pasta bake can still be proper, satisfying food if you keep the structure and adjust the heaviness. Think of it as editing, not removing.

Keep:

A sauce that coats pasta.

A top that browns.

Enough seasoning to make it taste like something on purpose.

Reduce:

Very heavy cream.

Excess cheese mixed through (save some for the top where it matters most).

Greasy additions that can make the bake feel weighty.

Replace:

Some cream with crème fraîche, Greek yoghurt, or soft cheese. They give richness with a bit of tang, which makes the whole thing feel fresher.

Some cheese with herbs, lemon zest, mustard, and black pepper. Flavour isn’t only dairy; it just often hides there.

The Best Pasta Bakes

And if you're worried about the lack of indulgence: remember that crunch counts as indulgence. A small breadcrumb topping, properly buttered, delivers that "bake" feeling without needing half a block of Cheddar stirred into the sauce.

Light doesn't mean joyless. It just means you can stand up afterwards without making that small, dignified noise.

Chapter 5: Weekend Showstoppers And Deep Comfort

Recipe 41: Four-Cheese Lasagne With Roasted Garlic And Spinach



Serves: 6–8

Time: 40 minutes prep, 45–50 minutes bake, plus resting

Ingredients

2 whole garlic bulbs

1 tbsp olive oil

Salt and black pepper

200 g spinach (fresh)

The Best Pasta Bakes

Lasagne sheets (about 10–12)

Cheese sauce

60 g butter

60 g plain flour

900 ml milk

200 g mature Cheddar, grated

150 g mozzarella, grated

120 g Gruyère or Emmental, grated

80 g cream cheese

Pinch nutmeg

Optional: 40 g parmesan-style cheese for the top

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan). Slice the tops off the garlic bulbs, drizzle with oil, wrap in foil, and roast for 30–35 minutes until soft.
2. Wilt spinach, squeeze dry, chop.
3. Make cheese sauce: melt butter, stir in flour 1 minute. Gradually whisk in milk. Simmer until thick.
4. Stir in Cheddar, mozzarella, Gruyère/Emmental, cream cheese, and nutmeg. Squeeze roasted garlic cloves into the sauce and whisk/smash until smooth-ish. Season well.
5. Assemble: a thin layer of sauce, then sheets, then spinach dotted through, more sauce. Repeat, finishing with sauce and optional parmesan-style on top.
6. Bake 45–50 minutes until bubbling and deeply golden. Rest 15 minutes before slicing.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF lasagne sheets and GF thickener.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 8)

Calories 620; protein 28 g; fat 34 g; carbs 48 g; fibre 3 g; salt 1.5 g.

Pairing

Chardonnay or a Belgian-style tripel (if you're committing to the weekend).

Freezer Suitability

Excellent. Freeze whole or portions. Reheat covered, then uncover to re-crisp.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 42: Pulled Pork Mac Bake With BBQ Swirl And Cornbread Crumb



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake (plus pulled pork if making)

Ingredients

350 g macaroni

40 g butter

40 g plain flour

650 ml milk

1 tsp smoked paprika

1 tsp Dijon mustard

180 g Cheddar, grated

400 g cooked pulled pork (shop-bought or leftovers)

150 ml BBQ sauce (plus extra for swirling)

The Best Pasta Bakes

2 spring onions, sliced (optional)

Cornbread-style crumb

60 g breadcrumbs or crushed tortilla chips

30 g cooked polenta (fine cornmeal)

25 g butter, melted

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Make sauce: butter + flour 1 minute, whisk in milk, simmer until thick. Add paprika, mustard, Cheddar.
4. Stir in pulled pork, most of the BBQ sauce, spring onions (if using).
5. Mix with pasta, tip into dish. Swirl a little extra BBQ sauce over the top.
6. Mix crumb ingredients, scatter over.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten. Check BBQ sauce for allergens.

Dietary Notes

Not vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta and GF crumbs.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 650; protein 32 g; fat 32 g; carbs 58 g; fibre 3 g; salt 1.8 g.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Pairing

Cold lager or a smoky porter.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered then uncover.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 43: Beef And Red Wine Pappardelle Bake With Crispy Parmesan-Style Lid



Serves: 6

Time: 35 minutes prep, 35 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g pappardelle (or wide tagliatelle)

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

1 carrot, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

500 g beef mince

2 tbsp tomato purée

200 ml red wine

1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes

500 ml passata

The Best Pasta Bakes

1 beef stock cube + 150 ml hot water
1 tsp dried thyme
Salt and black pepper
120 g mozzarella, grated (optional)
80 g parmesan-style cheese, finely grated

Method

1. Heat oven to 190°C (170°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain carefully (wide ribbons tear when handled like laundry).
3. Make ragu: soften onion and carrot 8–10 minutes. Add garlic. Add mince and brown.
4. Stir in purée 1 minute. Add wine and bubble 2–3 minutes. Add tomatoes, passata, stock, thyme. Simmer 12–15 minutes until thick. Season.
5. Combine pasta and ragu, tip into dish. Top with mozzarella (if using) then a generous layer of parmesan-style cheese for a proper lid.
6. Bake 30–35 minutes until bubbling and the top is crisp and bronzed. Rest 10 minutes.

Allergens

Gluten, dairy.

Dietary Notes

Gluten-free with GF pasta. Alcohol cooks off but traces may remain; use stock if avoiding.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

The Best Pasta Bakes

Calories 620; protein 32 g; fat 24 g; carbs 62 g; fibre 5 g; salt 1.6 g.

Pairing

Cabernet Sauvignon or a robust stout.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered then uncover to crisp.

**Recipe 44: Seafood Marinara Pasta Bake With
Garlic Herb Crumb**



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

3 garlic cloves, crushed

2 tbsp tomato purée

1 tsp chilli flakes (optional)

1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes

500 ml passata

150 ml fish stock (or veg stock)

300 g raw king prawns

The Best Pasta Bakes

300 g seafood mix (squid rings, mussels, etc.), defrosted if frozen

Handful chopped parsley

Zest of ½ lemon

Garlic herb crumb

70 g breadcrumbs or panko

25 g butter, melted (or 1½ tbsp olive oil)

1 garlic clove, finely grated

2 tbsp chopped parsley

Pinch salt

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Make sauce: soften onion 5 minutes. Add garlic. Stir in purée and chilli flakes 1 minute.
4. Add tomatoes, passata, stock. Simmer 10 minutes until thick.
5. Stir in seafood and simmer 2 minutes only (just to warm through). Add parsley and lemon zest.
6. Combine with pasta, tip into dish. Scatter crumb topping.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Shellfish, possibly molluscs, gluten, dairy if using butter.

Dietary Notes

The Best Pasta Bakes

Pescatarian. Dairy-free if using oil instead of butter.
Gluten-free with GF pasta and GF crumbs.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 470; protein 28 g; fat 10 g; carbs 62 g; fibre 5 g;
salt 1.6 g (stock varies).

Pairing

Dry white (Verdicchio) or a crisp lager.

Freezer Suitability

Not ideal (seafood texture suffers). Best eaten fresh or
refrigerated for 1–2 days.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 45: Truffle Mushroom And Beef “Bistro” Pasta Bake



Serves: 4–6

Time: 30 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g rigatoni

1 tbsp butter + 1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

400 g mushrooms, sliced

500 g beef mince

2 tbsp plain flour

300 ml beef stock

200 ml crème fraîche

1 tbsp Worcestershire sauce

1–2 tsp truffle oil (optional, to finish)

The Best Pasta Bakes

120 g Gruyère or Emmental, grated

Salt and black pepper

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Fry onion in butter and oil 5 minutes. Add mushrooms and cook 10 minutes until browned.
4. Add mince and brown. Stir in flour 1 minute.
5. Add stock gradually, simmer until thick. Stir in crème fraîche and Worcestershire. Season.
6. Combine with pasta, tip into dish, top with Gruyère/Emmental.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Drizzle truffle oil over after baking (not before—heat can mute it). Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten. Worcestershire may contain fish.

Dietary Notes

Gluten-free with GF pasta and cornflour thickener.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 650; protein 32 g; fat 34 g; carbs 55 g; fibre 3 g; salt 1.6 g.

Pairing

Pinot Noir or a rich porter.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered.

Recipe 46: Chicken, Bacon And Ranch Pasta Bake

(Proper Comfort, No Apologies)



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne

1 tbsp olive oil

200 g smoked bacon lardons

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

400 g cooked chicken, shredded

250 ml milk

200 g cream cheese

1 tsp dried dill (or 1 tbsp fresh)

The Best Pasta Bakes

1 tsp dried parsley
½ tsp onion granules
½ tsp garlic granules
120 g Cheddar, grated
80 g mozzarella, grated
Black pepper (bacon is salty)

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Fry bacon until lightly crisp. Add onion and cook 5 minutes. Add garlic 30 seconds.
4. Stir in milk and cream cheese until smooth. Add herbs and granules.
5. Stir in chicken and half the Cheddar. Season with pepper.
6. Combine with pasta, tip into dish. Top with remaining Cheddar and mozzarella.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Not vegetarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 680; protein 34 g; fat 38 g; carbs 52 g; fibre 2 g; salt 1.9 g.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Pairing

Cold lager or a pale ale.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered then uncover.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 47: Giant Meatball And Mozzarella Pasta Bake

(The Centrepiece One)



Serves: 6

Time: 35 minutes prep, 30 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g rigatoni

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

2 tbsp tomato purée

1 x 400 g tin chopped tomatoes

500 ml passata

The Best Pasta Bakes

1 tsp dried oregano
1 tsp sugar (optional)
Salt and black pepper
250 g mozzarella, torn

Meatballs

500 g beef mince (or half beef, half pork)
50 g breadcrumbs
1 egg
1 tsp dried oregano
1 garlic clove, grated
50 g parmesan-style cheese (optional)
Salt and black pepper

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Make meatballs: mix ingredients, roll into 12–14 balls. Brown in a pan (or roast on a tray) until coloured. They'll finish cooking in the oven.
3. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
4. Make sauce: soften onion 5 minutes, add garlic, purée 1 minute. Add tomatoes, passata, oregano, sugar, simmer 10 minutes until thick. Season.
5. Mix pasta with sauce, tip into dish. Nestle meatballs in. Top with mozzarella.
6. Bake 25–30 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 10 minutes.

Allergens

Gluten, dairy if using cheese, egg.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Dietary Notes

Gluten-free with GF breadcrumbs and GF pasta. Not vegetarian.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 640; protein 34 g; fat 26 g; carbs 62 g; fibre 5 g; salt 1.6 g.

Pairing

Chianti or a robust amber ale.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze cooked portions; reheat covered.

Recipe 48: Creamy Lobster-Style “Luxury” Pasta Bake

(Budget-Friendly Version)



Serves: 4–6

Time: 25 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g penne

300 g seafood sticks or mixed seafood (budget-friendly)

1 tbsp butter

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

2 tbsp plain flour

The Best Pasta Bakes

500 ml milk

100 ml double cream

1 tsp Dijon mustard

Zest of ½ lemon

2 tbsp chopped parsley

120 g Gruyère/Emmental (or Cheddar), grated

Black pepper, salt to taste

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Make sauce: soften onion in butter and oil 5 minutes. Add garlic. Stir in flour 1 minute. Whisk in milk gradually, simmer until thick.
4. Stir in cream, mustard, lemon zest, parsley, and most of the cheese. Season with pepper.
5. Stir in seafood gently, then pasta. Tip into dish, top with remaining cheese.
6. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes.

Allergens

Shellfish/fish (depending on seafood), dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Pescatarian. Gluten-free with GF pasta and GF thickener.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 540; protein 22 g; fat 22 g; carbs 62 g; fibre 3 g; salt 1.5 g.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Pairing

Chablis-style white or a crisp lager.

Freezer Suitability

Not ideal (seafood texture). Best refrigerated 1–2 days.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 49: Ultimate Five-Cheese “Volcano” Pasta Bake

(For When You’ve Given Up Pretending)



Serves: 6

Time: 20 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

350 g rigatoni

40 g butter

40 g plain flour

700 ml milk

1 tsp Dijon mustard

100 g mature Cheddar, grated

100 g mozzarella, grated

The Best Pasta Bakes

80 g Red Leicester, grated
80 g Gruyère/Emmental, grated
60 g cream cheese
Black pepper, salt to taste
Optional: chilli flakes for the top

Method

1. Heat oven to 200°C (180°C fan).
2. Cook pasta 2 minutes under. Drain.
3. Make sauce: butter + flour 1 minute, whisk in milk gradually, simmer until thick.
4. Stir in mustard, cream cheese, and three of the grated cheeses (save some for topping). Season well with pepper.
5. Mix with pasta, tip into dish. Top with remaining cheeses (and chilli flakes if you like).
6. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and deeply golden. Rest 10 minutes (it's molten).

Allergens

Dairy, gluten.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian (check cheeses). Gluten-free with GF pasta and suitable thickener.

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 720; protein 28 g; fat 42 g; carbs 55 g; fibre 2 g; salt 1.7 g.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Pairing

Cold lager, or a sharp cider to cut through.

Freezer Suitability

Yes, though the sauce thickens on thawing; reheat gently with a splash of milk stirred in.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Recipe 50: Baked Lasagne-Style Gnocchi With Basil Cream And Roasted Tomatoes



Serves: 4–6

Time: 20 minutes prep, 25 minutes bake

Ingredients

1 kg potato gnocchi (shelf-stable or fresh)

250 g cherry tomatoes

1 tbsp olive oil

Salt and black pepper

1 tbsp butter

1 tbsp olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

2 tbsp tomato purée

400 ml passata

The Best Pasta Bakes

200 ml single cream (or crème fraîche)

2 tbsp pesto (check for nuts)

150 g mozzarella, torn

40 g parmesan-style cheese

Basil, to serve (optional)

Method

1. Heat oven to 210°C (190°C fan).
2. Roast tomatoes: toss with oil, salt and pepper, roast 12–15 minutes until blistered.
3. Make sauce: soften onion in butter and oil 5 minutes. Add garlic, then purée 1 minute. Add passata, simmer 6–8 minutes.
4. Stir in cream and pesto. Season.
5. Tip gnocchi into the sauce (no need to pre-boil most fresh/shelf-stable gnocchi; check pack—if it insists, give it a quick 2-minute dunk).
6. Add roasted tomatoes, tip into dish. Top with mozzarella and parmesan-style.
7. Bake 20–25 minutes until bubbling and golden. Rest 5 minutes. Finish with basil.

Allergens

Dairy, gluten (many gnocchi contain wheat), pesto may contain nuts.

Dietary Notes

Vegetarian. Gluten-free if using GF gnocchi and nut-free pesto (or omit).

The Best Pasta Bakes

Approximate Nutrition (per serving, based on 6)

Calories 560; protein 18 g; fat 22 g; carbs 72 g; fibre 4 g; salt 1.4 g.

Pairing

Italian white (Vermentino) or a crisp lager.

Freezer Suitability

Yes. Freeze portions; reheat covered with a splash of water to loosen.

The Sunday-Bake Effect

(Why These Dinners Feel Like A Reset)

There's a particular kind of calm that arrives when something substantial is in the oven. It's not just that dinner is handled; it's that dinner is inevitable.

Weekend pasta bakes do three quiet jobs at once. They feed people. They make leftovers. And they give you a sense that life is, briefly, under control.

A showstopper bake doesn't need rare ingredients; it needs intention. Roasted garlic instead of raw. A proper rest before slicing. A topping that's browned all the way to the edges. The small details that make the kitchen smell like you've got the whole thing sorted, even if you're wearing mismatched socks and the washing basket is judging you.

If you're feeding a crowd, remember this: people don't remember perfection, they remember abundance. Big dish, bubbling top, extra salad and bread, and a confident serving spoon. That's it. That's the magic.

And if it's just you (or you and a quiet evening), a big bake is still worth it. Because leftovers are future kindness. That's not meal prep. That's time travel.

Epilogue:

The Last Scoop, The Last Bubble, The Last Bit Of Crunch

There's a moment, after everyone's eaten, when the dish is still warm but the kitchen has gone quiet. The oven ticks as it cools. The spoon rests, heroic and slightly exhausted. The last bubbles settle into the sauce like it's finally had a chance to sit down.

That's the real appeal of pasta bakes. They're not complicated, but they feel complete. They gather people without making a fuss about it. They stretch to feed extra mouths, they turn leftovers into tomorrow's relief, and they transform ordinary ingredients into something that looks like you meant it.

If you take nothing else from this book, take this: undercook the pasta, thicken the sauce, season properly, and let the top brown. The rest is personal taste and whatever your fridge is trying to get rid of.

May your edges always caramelize, your cheese always blister, and your baking dish always be just a bit too full. That's how you know you're doing it right.

About The Author

Robin Wickens writes practical, flavour-forward cookbooks for real life: the kind where ingredients are easy to find in British supermarkets, instructions are clear, and dinner still tastes like a small victory. When Robin isn't developing recipes, you'll usually find them thinking about sauces, testing toppings, and arguing (politely) with the oven about what "golden" truly means.

Acknowledgements

To every home cook who has ever rescued a midweek evening with a jar of passata and a block of cheese—this one's for you. And to the taste-testers, willing or otherwise, who bravely accepted "just one more version" and still came back for seconds: thank you. You are the backbone of culinary progress.

Disclaimer

This book is provided for informational purposes only. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, cooking involves variables outside the author's control (including ingredient brands, equipment, and oven performance). Always follow safe food handling practices, cook poultry and seafood thoroughly, and reheat leftovers until piping hot throughout.

If you have allergies or dietary restrictions, read labels carefully and avoid cross-contamination in your kitchen. Nutritional information is approximate and provided as a general guide only. If you have medical concerns or require specific nutritional targets, consult a qualified professional.

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Choosing Pasta Shapes

Short shapes with ridges and hollows (rigatoni, penne, fusilli) are best because they grab sauce and stay satisfying after baking. Macaroni is unbeatable for cheese sauces. Long pasta can work (pappardelle/tagliatelle), but handle gently and keep sauce thick.

Sauce Thickness: The Coating Test

Dip a spoon into the sauce and drag your finger through it. If the line stays visible for a moment, it's thick enough. If it runs straight back together like a puddle, simmer longer.

The Two-Cheese Rule

One cheese for flavour (mature Cheddar, parmesan-style, Gruyère).

One cheese for melt (mozzarella, Emmental).

Use both and you get a top that browns and stretches without tasting flat.

How To Avoid Split Cream Sauces

Avoid boiling hard once cream is added. Keep it at a gentle simmer. If it splits slightly, whisk in a splash of cold milk and it often pulls back together. For reheating, do it covered and gently, adding a splash of milk if needed.

Building Flavour Fast

The Best Pasta Bakes

Tomato purée: fry it for a full minute.

Onions: cook them until genuinely soft—rushed onions taste raw.

Garlic: add it after onions, and don't let it burn.

Herbs: dried go in early, fresh go in late.

Breadcrumb Toppings That Actually Crunch

Panko is the easiest route to crunch. Always mix crumbs with melted butter or olive oil before sprinkling. Dry breadcrumbs go dusty; buttered crumbs go golden.

Make-Ahead: The Clever Way

Assemble the bake, cool the sauce slightly first, then cover and refrigerate. Bake from chilled by adding 10–15 minutes and covering with foil for the first half so the top doesn't overbrown.

Freezing: Best Practice

Cool completely. Portion if possible. Wrap tightly (foil + freezer bag is excellent). Label with date and name. Reheat from thawed for best texture, covered at first, then uncovered to re-crisp.

Reheating Without Dryness

Add a splash of milk, stock, or water before reheating. Cover with foil. Heat until piping hot, then uncover for 5 minutes to refresh the top.

Dietary Constraints And Practical Notes

Vegetarian-Friendly Recipes

The Best Pasta Bakes

3, 7, 13, 21–30, 34, 37, 39, 41, 49, 50 (plus several others with easy swaps; check cheese types).

Pescatarian-Friendly Recipes

4, 9, 15, 32, 35, 38, 44, 48.

Lower-Fat Leaning Options

31, 33, 34, 35, 37, 40 (and any tomato-based bake with reduced cheese can be “lighter”).

Gluten-Free Approach

Use GF pasta and, for white sauces, thicken with cornflour slurry (mix 2 tsp cornflour with 2 tbsp cold milk/water, then whisk into simmering sauce). Use GF breadcrumbs/panko where needed. Always check sausages, sauces, and seasoning blends.

Dairy-Free Approach

Use unsweetened oat milk in white sauces, dairy-free butter/spread, plant-based soft cheese, and a melt-friendly vegan cheese. Increase seasoning slightly (salt, mustard, lemon) to compensate for reduced dairy richness.

Nut-Free Approach

Check pesto and toppings (walnuts). Choose nut-free pesto or omit.

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1. Egg-Free Approach

Most bakes are egg-free unless using egg pasta, fresh filled pasta, or meatballs (Recipe 47 uses egg). Use egg-free pasta and substitute 2 tbsp milk in meatballs plus extra breadcrumbs for binding, or use a commercial egg replacer.

2. Thicken The Sauce Before Baking

A pasta bake is not the place for a thin sauce. Simmer tomato sauces until they coat a spoon. For white sauces, cook the flour and butter properly, then whisk in milk gradually and simmer until glossy and thick. Thick sauce equals flavour that sticks to the pasta rather than sliding off.

3. Season Like You Mean It

Oven dishes mute seasoning. Taste the sauce before mixing with pasta and season until it tastes just slightly “too good”. After baking, it will be perfect. Pepper, mustard, lemon zest, herbs, and a pinch of sugar in tomato sauces all help.

4. The Top Is A Job, Not A Decoration

Use two cheeses (one for flavour, one for melt). Or add breadcrumbs tossed with butter for crunch. The difference between a good pasta bake and a great one is that golden, crisp finish.

5. Rest It

The Best Pasta Bakes

Five to ten minutes out of the oven turns molten chaos into a bake that serves cleanly and tastes better. It's not optional. It's structural engineering.

The Best Pasta Bakes

Thank you for cooking from The Best Pasta Bakes. If this book saved your midweek even once, it's done its job. If it also gave you leftovers, you're winning twice.

This book is provided for informational purposes only. The author and publisher are not responsible for any adverse effects, allergic reactions, losses, or damages resulting from the use of the recipes or information in this book. Cooking involves variables outside the author's control, including ingredient brands, equipment performance, and oven calibration. Always follow safe food handling practices, cook poultry and seafood thoroughly, and reheat leftovers until piping hot throughout.

Allergen notice: Recipes may contain or come into contact with common allergens including (but not limited to) gluten, dairy, egg, soy, fish, shellfish, and nuts. Always read labels carefully and avoid cross-contamination if you have allergies or dietary restrictions.

Nutritional information is approximate and provided as a general guide only. If you require specific nutritional targets or have medical concerns, consult a qualified professional.

Dedication

For everyone who has ever “just popped it in the oven” and somehow produced dinner, comfort, and a tiny miracle.

Notes To The Reader

Pasta bakes are the friend who turns up with a casserole dish and zero judgement. They are forgiving, scalable, fridge-friendly, and deeply satisfying in that particular way only browned cheese can be.

This book is written for UK kitchens: metric measures, British supermarket ingredients, and realistic weeknight rhythms. You'll find optional swaps for common allergens, notes for dietary preferences, and freezer guidance so you can cook once and feel smug twice.

A quick note on timings: ovens vary. If your bake is bubbling at the edges and the top is properly golden, you're home and dry. If it still looks pale and shy, give it another 5–10 minutes and let the crust do what it came here to do.

How This Book Is Organised

This book contains 50 pasta-bake recipes, grouped by mood so you can find what you need quickly.

Each recipe includes:

A recipe image

Ingredients with metric measures

Long-form method with practical technique notes

Allergen notes and UK-friendly substitutions

Dietary notes where relevant

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Approximate nutrition per serving

Wine/beer pairing suggestions

Freezer suitability and reheating guidance

You'll also find technique and reference sections (store cupboard staples, equipment, conversions, allergen swaps, and food safety) so the book works as a complete kitchen companion, not just a list of recipes.

Store Cupboard List

If you keep these in, you can turn almost any random Tuesday into a pasta bake:

Pasta and grains

Dried pasta shapes (penne, fusilli, rigatoni, macaroni)

Lasagne sheets

Breadcrumbs or panko (or stale bread to blitz)

Tins and jars

Chopped tomatoes

Passata

Tomato purée

Tuna

Sweetcorn

Roasted red peppers

Capers

Olives

Pesto

Stocks and seasonings

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Stock cubes/pots (chicken, veg, beef)
Garlic granules
Dried oregano, basil, thyme
Smoked paprika
Chilli flakes
Mustard (Dijon or English)
Worcestershire sauce (or vegetarian version)
Soy sauce (or tamari for gluten-free)
Plain flour
Cornflour

Oils and extras
Olive oil
Vegetable oil
Vinegar (red wine, cider, or rice vinegar)
Honey or sugar (for balancing tomato sauces)

Equipment You'll Actually Use

A large baking dish (about 30 x 20 cm)
A deep roasting tin (for bigger batches)
A large saucepan (pasta)
A frying pan (sauce base)
A whisk (for smooth sauces)
A colander
A wooden spoon
A box grater
Measuring jug and spoons
Foil (for covering while heating through)
Freezer tubs or foil trays (if batch cooking)

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Techniques: Pasta Bake Basics

Undercook the pasta

Boil pasta 2 minutes less than the packet says. It finishes cooking in the oven, soaking up sauce rather than turning soft.

Sauce thickness matters

A pasta bake needs a sauce that clings. Aim for “coats the back of a spoon”. If it’s thin like soup, it will puddle and separate.

Cheese layering is strategy

Mix some cheese through for melt, then top with a second cheese for crust. Cheddar for flavour, mozzarella for stretch, parmesan-style for salty depth.

Resting is not optional

Let your bake sit 5–10 minutes after the oven. It firms up, slices better, and stops you burning the roof of your mouth in a heroic but unnecessary way.

Crunch without dryness

Breadcrumbs love a little fat. Toss with olive oil or melted butter before sprinkling so they toast evenly.

Conversions & Temperatures (Quick Reference)

Oven temperatures in this book are conventional ovens unless stated.

If you use a fan oven, reduce by 20°C.

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Typical guide

200°C conventional = 180°C fan

190°C conventional = 170°C fan

180°C conventional = 160°C fan

210°C conventional = 190°C fan

220°C conventional = 200°C fan

Portion scaling

Doubling a recipe usually needs a deeper dish and a bit longer in the oven. Cover with foil for the first half so the top doesn't overbrown before the centre is hot.

Allergens & Swaps

Gluten

Use gluten-free pasta. Keep sauces slightly looser; GF pasta can absorb more. Use GF breadcrumbs where needed.

Dairy

Use unsweetened oat milk in white sauces, vegan butter/spread, and a melt-friendly dairy-free cheese. Add extra mustard, lemon zest, and a pinch more salt to boost flavour.

Egg

Most recipes are egg-free unless using fresh egg pasta or meatballs. Choose egg-free pasta where needed. For meatballs, use an egg replacer or add extra breadcrumbs plus 2 tbsp milk for binding.

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Fish and shellfish

Swap seafood with cooked chicken, mushrooms, or roasted veg. Use capers/olives/lemon to keep brightness.

Nuts

Use nut-free pesto and skip walnut toppings.

Food Safety And Reheating

Cool leftovers quickly, refrigerate within 2 hours, and eat within 2 days.

Reheat until piping hot all the way through. If reheating in the oven, cover with foil to prevent drying, then uncover for the last few minutes to refresh the top.

Freeze cooled portions promptly, wrap well, label, and use within 3 months for best quality.

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